

# READING THE SPEECH CYCLES IN THE BOOK OF JOB

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The field of Old Testament study today is marked by disagreement over method, in particular reader- or audience-based methods and historical-critical methods (including source, form, and redaction criticism). Scholars like Conrad (1991, pp. 3-33) argue that history-based methods ignore the finished product and its implied readers in favor of radically reconstructed texts and supposed original audiences. They argue that preoccupation with the "intention" of the original author is fallacious because biblical texts typically have multiple "authors," whose intentions are unrecoverable anyway. They insist on reading a text as a meaningful whole rather than as a collection of materials from an undeducible period of time. On the other hand, scholars like Roberts (1991, pp. 9-12) argue that prophetic books in particular really are much more like collections of sermons than connected narratives.

Barton (1984, pp. 205-6) has observed: "The reason why biblical scholars have so often become disillusioned with each of the methods they have committed themselves to is that they have asked too much of them...." In the same spirit, scholars like Fewell (1988, pp. 10-31) and Stibbe (1992, pp. 1-2) attempt integrative approaches to biblical texts. If one is not too wed to a single method, one may be able to choose different methods to solve different problems in a biblical book.

One problem not satisfactorily solved by historical-critical studies is that of the "disturbed" third speech cycle in Job 22-31. Scholars may well be right that the original structure of those chapters was different from the Masoretic text, but any reconstruction leaves unaddressed the present form of the book. This essay represents an effort to take seriously that shape instead of resorting to hypothetical reconstructions of the third cycle. The thesis of this study is that the third cycle presents Job as wavering in his convictions, considering

whether to adopt the views of his "friends."<sup>1</sup> This stance concerning the third cycle also sheds light on reading the Elihu speeches (chapters 32-37), the dialogues with God (38:1-42:6), and the concluding statement by God (42:7) that Job and not his friends had spoken correctly about God.

*Reconstructions of Job 22-37*

Beginning in Job 3 one finds a pattern in which Job speaks first, then his friends speak in turn, with Job responding to each. This pattern is totally consistent in the first two cycles (chapters 3-14 and 15-21). The third cycle begins with a speech by Eliphaz (22:1-30), a response by Job (23:1-24:25), a short third speech by Bildad (25:1-6), and a very long speech by Job (26:1-31:40). There is no third speech by Zophar and no response by Job. What is more, in several places (particularly 24:18-25; 26:5-14; 27:7-23) scholars think Job adopts the views of his friends, and the Septuagint omits much of this material: 22:3b, 13-16, 20, 24, 29-30; 23:9, 15; 24:4b, 5c, 8a, 14-18a; 26:5-11, 14a,b; 27:19b, 21-23 (Driver, Gray, 1921, p. 1).

Consequently, a few scholars (e.g., F. Baumgartel, K. Fullerton, E. Kalt, N. Peters) have denied that a third cycle even existed (see Fohrer, 1968, p. 327). Westermann (1977, p. 131) argues that the cycle ended with 23:17 and agrees with Kuhl that one conclusion about chapters 24-27 can be drawn with confidence: "as they have been transmitted to us, these chapters *cannot* present us with a unified text." Other scholars have been less extreme, attempting to reconstruct the third cycle. Representative examples, displayed in a chart, follow.

1. This study does not involve a psychological reading of the text such as that of Quillo (1991) who traces Job's acceptance of his own death.

RECONSTRUCTIONS OF THE THIRD CYCLE OF SPEECHES

	Habel (1985)	Pope (1965)	Rowley (1970)	Terrien (1954)
Eliphaz	22:1-30	Same	Same	Same
Job	23:1-17	23:1-24:17,21	23:1-24:17,25	23:1-24:17,25
Bildad	25:1-6;26:5-14	Same	Same	Same
Job	26:1-4;27:1-12	26:1-4;27:1-7	26:1-4;27:2-6	26:1-4;27:1-12
Zophar	27:13-23 24:1-25	27:8-23; 24:18-20,22-25	27:7-23; 24:18-24	27:13-23 24:18-24

The *Jerusalem Bible* is very similar: it moves 26:1-4 to the end of the chapter, leaving 25:1-6 and 26:6-14 as Bildad's second speech, followed by Job's response in 26:1-4 and 27:1-12. It ascribes 27:1-12 to Job and 27:13-23 followed by 24:18-24 to Zophar. Gordis (1965, pp. 96-7) differs in attributing chapter 24 to Job. Finally, Job's closing soliloquy is often, but not always, considered to include chapters 29-31, with the poem on wisdom in chapter 28 understood as an addition. Clines (1982, p. 208) suggests that 27:13-28:28 constitutes Zophar's third speech.

Having decided that the third cycle of speeches is in disarray, scholars next move to ponder how the Elihu speeches fit. Some scholars see the speeches as integral to the work. Cornill (1913, p. 249), for example, even considered it the book's finest answer to the problem of theodicy. Gordis (1965, pp. 104-113) argues that the Elihu speeches were added by the author of the book to articulate an intermediate position between that of Job and the friends, showing how both of them are wrong. Given the fact that Elihu is never mentioned in the book of Job outside of chapters 32-37, and that these chapters exhibit some stylistic peculiarities, other scholars frequently argue that the chapters constitute an addition to the book's original structure (see Irwin, 1937). Pope (1965, pp. xxvii-xxviii) argues that the author of the Elihu speeches was shocked at Job's blasphemy and corrected his theology in words drawn in part from God's response to Job (chapters 38-42). Freedman (1968) thinks that they were additions originally intended to strengthen the dialogue by supplementing various speeches of Job, but were subsequently grouped

together. Carstensen (1963, p. 114) calls them "the attempt of an earnest pedagogue to rescue God from his own power." Tate (1971, p. 495) sees Elihu as more pastoral than the friends, someone who prepares Job for his encounter with God, without completely breaking out of the mold of the friends. Whedbee (1977, p. 18) argues instead that Elihu is a "comic character whom the writer seeks to expose by the timing of Elihu's appearance and the type of language he uses." Curtiss (1988, pp. 97-8) even advances the thesis that Elihu is the "caricature of the youthful enthusiast, the convinced fanatic," whose cycle was added to discredit the friends' view with four speeches patently too stupid to answer.

### *Reading the Third Cycle of Speeches*

One basic (though perhaps unacknowledged) premise of scholars who revise the third cycle is that Job and his friends underwent no changes during the debate. Hence, the speeches are reconstructed to make Job continue to hold his ground against his friends (as well as to furnish a third speech for Zophar). In the text as it has been transmitted, however, Job is less constant. James L. Crenshaw (1984, pp. 61, 67, 69) has shown how Job's view of God changed in the first two cycles from a God whom Job can force to acknowledge Job's innocence to a God who is bent on destroying Job for no good reason. Even then Job hopes for a vindicator who will defend him after his death; meanwhile he wants to engrave his defense in stone until the vindicator arises and wonders if, beyond his death, God will again come to his side (pp. 73-4). The "friends," too, change from companions genuinely concerned to help Job into antagonists determined to justify themselves and their understanding of God (p. 70; cf. Clines, 1982, pp. 209-210).

The third cycle pushes further the change in Job as he vacillates over the possibility that the "friends" were right. In 24:18-24 he expresses sentiments said to be similar to those in the second Zophar speech in chapter 20. Particularly in vv. 18-20 and 24 Job appears to concede Zophar's point that death comes even to the ruthless. Even so, that concession comes at the end of a lengthy discourse (24:1-17) about their illegitimate success. Job's point would seem to be, then, that God ignores their ruthlessness right up to the point of their death. Nothing in 24:18-24 approaches Zophar's description of the reversal of fortunes that befalls the wicked before their death.

Bildad's second speech (25:1-6) is admittedly brief, but that fact alone does not prove that it is incomplete. Job's following speech (chapters 26-31) is unusually long, and three times (26:1; 27:1; 29:1) it ascribes the words that

follow to Job. Such ascriptions elsewhere in the book indicate a change in speakers, except for the Elihu speeches (32:6; 34:1; 35:1; 36:1). Hence, the current arrangement may not be original. Regardless, the task at hand is to interpret that arrangement.

Job 26 divides into two parts. Verses 1-4 are often read as sarcasm, as if Job were saying that Bildad's words had been of no hope. It is possible, however, to take them at face value and understand them to mean that Job confessed his powerlessness (cf. Job's speech in 10:3-13) and admitted some value at least in Bildad's wisdom. That reading is all the more plausible when one notes that in 25:2-6 Bildad agreed with Job's complaint in chapter 9 to the effect that no human could be just before God, whose wisdom and might could overwhelm anyone. Job's question in v. 4 about who led Bildad to his insight is answered in vv. 5-14 with a hymn in celebration of God as creator. If, as seems quite plausible, the hymn was borrowed from elsewhere and quoted by Job, the superscription in 27:1 might simply indicate that Job was again speaking in his own words. Thus, chapter 26 can be read to show Bildad and Job finding common ground.

In 27:1-6 Job agrees with Bildad that God can treat him as God wishes, though he disagrees that he had done anything deserving punishment. Verses 7-12 are sometimes attributed to Job, even by scholars who reconstruct the speeches. In them Job wishes that his enemy (Bildad or a number of people conceived of collectively) would suffer the fate of the godless. His point is that God cuts off the wicked without hope.

The last half of the chapter (vv. 13-23), however, is widely denied to Job on the grounds that the verses do not fit with Job's view in 21:7-34 that the wicked are not punished (e.g., Terrien and Murphy, 1991, p. 654). Actually, in 27:13-15 Job says that punishment falls upon the children of the wicked instead of upon the wicked themselves. That thought is expressed in 21:19 also, but scholars routinely construe 21:19a as a quotation (Gordis, 1965, p. 910). The *New Revised Standard Version* adds "You say" at the beginning of v. 19, and the *New International Version* adds "It is said." The effect of these additions is to deny what follows to Job without any indication in the text that Job was quoting someone else. Having denied such thoughts to Job in 21:19, they deny them to Job again in 27:14.

In verses 16-23, however, Job moves perceptibly toward the view of his opponents. He sees an end to the impunity of the wicked (vv. 18-23); punishment will overtake them. If he means that their punishment, long delayed, will eventually come, that position is not incompatible with his view in 21:7-34, but it is incompatible with Zophar's view in chapter 20 that their

demise would come swiftly. In v. 17, however, Job claims that the righteous will receive the ill-gotten wealth of the unrighteous. This statement appears to be a view of retribution that goes beyond anything the friends had said. Zophar comes closest with his statement that, "They will give back the fruit of their toil," but even he does not say that the gains of the wicked will rebound to the righteous.

Since chapters 29-31 conclude Job's defense, the only material still to be accounted for is chapter 28. It appears without an introduction in the midst of Job's long speech (chapters 26-31), so a reader might well assume it came from him. Further, the chapter concludes: "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" (28:28), and Job is introduced in 1:1 as one who feared God and departed from evil. Hence Laurin (1972, p. 88) argues that the chapter was "an integral and deliberate element in the argument by the [original] author." Even so, it raises a new subject: the inscrutability of wisdom. While it is possible for a human to know the sources of precious metals (vv. 1-11), the place of wisdom and the path to it are beyond human knowledge (vv. 12-22). God, by contrast, knows them both (v. 23). Human wisdom, therefore, consists of fearing God. The question of whether the chapter is a secondary insertion, serving along with chapter 27 to reinstate Job as a sage (so Childs, 1979, p. 542), or is original may be left open. The chapter anticipates and foreshadows Job's coming dialogue with God out of the whirlwind (38:1-42:6). There Job twice will submit to God, not simply in light of God's power, but in the light of his own lack of divine wisdom.

### *Reading the Elihu Speeches*

In the first two speech cycles (chapters 3-14, 15-21), the issue is whether Job or his friends were correct about God's dealings with people, an issue that ultimately is settled in Job's favor by God in 42:7. In the third cycle, Job begins to waver in his thinking. His lengthy speech at times shows affinity with his friends, at times goes beyond them, and at times remains firm in its commitment to his own earlier thinking. In chapters 32-37 his speech is matched in length by the efforts of Elihu to win over Job in view of the failure of his friends to do so completely (32:2-3).

Additions or not, the Elihu speeches, especially the recitation of God's works at the end of chapter 37, "function hermeneutically to shape the reader's hearing of the divine speeches" (Childs, 1979, p. 541). However, the speeches deny Job's innocence (33:9-12; 34:35-37) and affirm God's omnipotence (33:12; 36:26-37:24), justice (34:10-12, 21-30; 35:9-13; 36:6-9), and mercy

(33:26, 29). So, they leave unresolved the debate between Job and his friends and (*contra* Childs, p. 541) leave in limbo the adequacy of conventional wisdom. Dramatically, they function to heighten the suspense over the issue of whether Job will change his mind.

*Implications for Reading the Rest of Job*

God answered Job out of the whirlwind twice (38:1-40:2; 40:6-41:34), and Job answered him twice (40:3-5; 42:1-6). Then God told Eliphaz and his friends that Job had spoken correctly about God, while they had not (42:7). Gammie (1978, p. 226) argues that in God's second speech the descriptions of the behemoth and the leviathan anticipate God's verdict and intimate two answers to the question of theodicy:

(i) wisdom comes to light in the very midst of man's protestations, and (ii) even though God may seem to be in attack upon man, He Himself has provided man with the sexual strength to start again (Job 40:16-18) and with the defenses with which he may victoriously resist all attack (Job 40:18-19; 41:7-9, 18-21 [Engl. 41:15-17, 26-29]).

Even if Gammie is right, the more obvious point to be made is that God precluded Job's changing his mind and settled the issue about whether Job or the friends were correct. The force of 42:7 is to endorse Job's claim that righteous people do suffer, in his case at God's hands. The world is not so construed as to reward every good act and punish every evil act.

What is more, the reader - unlike Job - knows the contents of the Prologue (1:1-2:10). There (1:9) the "Accuser" asked the question: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Terrien (1954, p. 914; cf. Pope, 1965, p. 12) rephrases it thus: "Is there a man faithful to God for the sake of God?" The answer, of course, is that Job was such a man. In the Prologue, Job accepts as a matter of course that he will receive both good and bad from God (1:21; 2:10). A turn in one's fortunes was no reason for turning from God. The speech cycles address the notion that bad fortune was a sign of disobedience. Job's voice becomes more shrill as he denies any such connection and insists upon his innocence. He still "feared God." Burrows (1928, pp. 124-5) argues that Job was right to cling to his integrity.

The question left to ask is: according to the book of Job, what was there about God that made him worthy of human worship? Two characteristics are emphasized: omniscience and omnipotence. Scholars have objected that the

God of the Prologue is neither omniscient nor omnipotent since the "Accuser" seems to manipulate him into harming Job (or allowing harm to come to him) for no good reason (2:3). Actually, God was clearly confident of Job's fidelity all along, which probably amounts to the narrative equivalent of foreknowledge. He also accepted responsibility for what happened to Job. The Prologue may call into question the justice or mercy of God, but not his wisdom or power. Jung (1969, p. 4) is probably correct to say that interpreters should "admit the affect and submit to its violence." God's speeches from the whirlwind emphasize God's knowledge and power as displayed in creation in contrast with Job's ignorance and weakness. In the theophany God persuades Job that he was wrong, rather than crushing him (Burrows, 1928, p. 120). Faced with such a God, Job dropped his complaints and worshipped.

If this conclusion about the "worth" of God is unsatisfactory to modern readers, it is so because it is incomplete, not because it is wrong. Both Jews and Christians confess God's omniscience and omnipotence. For both, however, God is also a just and merciful God. These last two characteristics do make their presence felt in the speech cycles. The friends argued that if God is just and able, he must reward the righteous and punish the wicked. But that is precisely the challenge the "Accuser" hurled before the Almighty: did Job serve God only because it pays? The answer of the book is that God is deserving of worship even if it does not pay.<sup>2</sup> With that issue settled, the Epilogue could introduce the issue of the mercy of God in terms of God's restoration of Job's family, possessions, and position (42:10-17). Just as Job needed no cause to worship God, God needed no cause to bless Job. God's justice, if an issue at all, became subordinate to his mercy.

2. Burrows (1928, pp. 24-25) sees correctly that Job should have held to his integrity, but thinks that he learns through the speeches he was wrong in questioning God's justice. Yet those speeches make no appeal to justice, only to his knowledge and power.



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